

"Among contemporary writers in Mexico today Juan Rufo is expected to rank among the immortals."

—Selden Rodman, *The New York Times Book Review*

A masterpiece of the surreal, this stunning novel from Mexico depicts a man's strange quest for his heritage. Beseeched by his dying mother to locate his father, Pedro Páramo, whom they fled from years ago, Juan Preciado sets out for Comala. Comala is a town alive with whispers and shadows—a place seemingly populated only by memory and hallucinations. Built on the tyranny of the Páramo family, its barren and broken-down streets echo the voices of tormented spirits sharing the secrets of the past.

First published to both critical and popular acclaim in 1955, *Pedro Páramo* represented a distinct break with earlier, largely "realist" novels from Latin America. Rufo's entrancing mixture of vivid sensory images, violent passions, and inexplicable sorcery—a style that has come to be known as "magical realism"—has exerted a profound influence on subsequent Latin American writers, from José Donoso and Carlos Fuentes to Mario Vargas Llosa and Gabriel García Márquez.

A strange, brooding novel . . . Great immediacy, power, and beauty.

—*The Washington Post*

Juan Rufo (1918–1989) was born in Savilla, in the state of Jalisco, Mexico. His collection of short stories, *The Burning Plain* (1953), and *Pedro Páramo* established him as a major literary figure in Latin America. Margaret Sayers Paden is Professor Emerita of Spanish at the University of Missouri. She has translated numerous works from the Spanish to great acclaim, including *The Old Gringo* by Carlos Fuentes, *The Stories of Eva Luna* by Isabel Allende, and *Elemental Odes* by Pablo Neruda.

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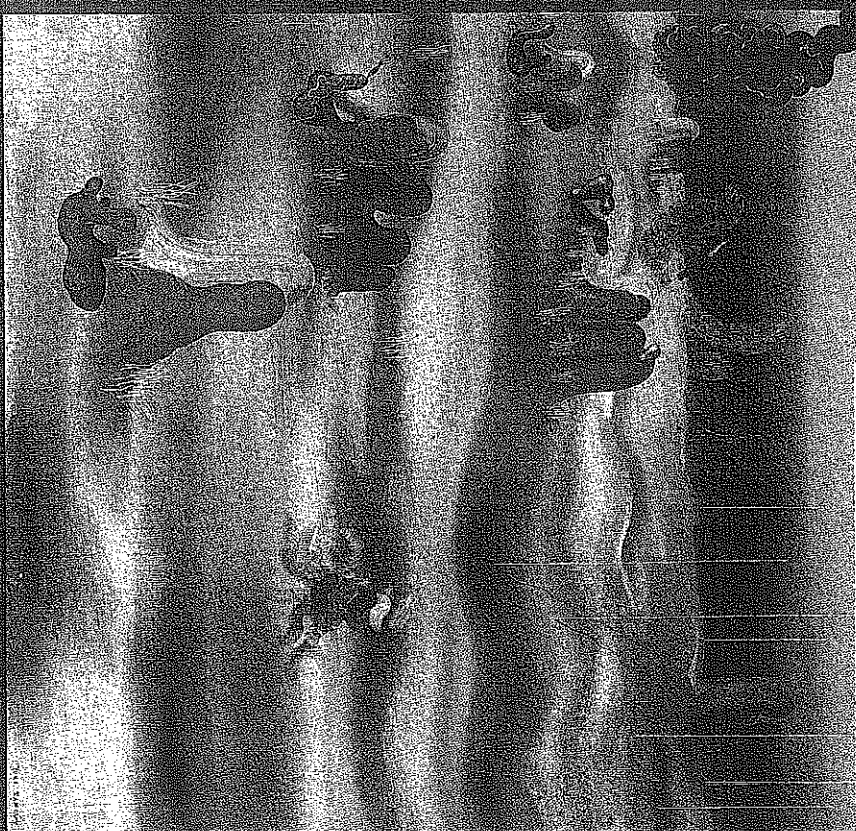
Pedro

Páramo

JUAN RUFO

Translated by Margaret Sayers Paden

With a Foreword by Susan Sontag



Pedro Páramo Juan Rufo

Grove Press

I came to Comala because I had been told that my father, a man named Pedro Páramo, lived there. It was my mother who told me. And I had promised her that after she died I would go see him. I squeezed her hands as a sign I would do it. She was near death, and I would have promised her anything. "Don't fail to go see him," she had insisted. "Some call him one thing, some another. I'm sure he will want to know you." At the time all I could do was tell her I would do what she asked, and from promising so often I kept repeating the promise even after I had pulled my hands free of her death grip.

Still earlier she had told me:

"Don't ask him for anything. Just what's ours. What he should have given me but never did. . . . Make him pay, son, for all those years he put us out of his mind."

"I will, Mother."

I never meant to keep my promise. But before I knew it my head began to swim with dreams and my imagination took flight. Little by little I began to build a world around a hope centered on the man called Pedro Páramo, the man who had been my mother's husband. That was why I had come to Comala.

It was during the dog days, the season when the August wind blows hot, venomous with the rotten stench of saponaria blossoms.

The road rose and fell. *It rises or falls depending on whether you're coming or going. If you are leaving, it's uphill, but as you arrive it's downhill.*

"What did you say that town down there is called?"

"Comala, señor."

"You're sure that's Comala?"

"I'm sure, señor."

"It's a sorry-looking place, what happened to it?"

"It's the times, señor."

I had expected to see the town of my mother's memories, of her nostalgia – nostalgia laced with sighs. She had lived her lifetime sighing about Comala, about going back. But she never had. Now I had come in her place. I was seeing things through her eyes, as she had seen them. She had given me her eyes to see. *Just as you pass the gate of Los Colimotes there's a beautiful view of a green plain tinged with the yellow of ripe corn. From there you can see Comala, turning the earth white, and lighting it at night. Her voice was secret, muffled, as if she were talking to herself. . . . Mother.*

"And why are you going to Comala, if you don't mind my asking?" I heard the man say.

"I've come to see my father," I replied.

"Umh!" he said.

And again silence.

We were making our way down the hill to the clip-clop of the burros' hooves. Their sleepy eyes were bulging from the August heat.

"You're going to get some welcome." Again I heard the voice of

the man walking at my side. "They'll be happy to see someone after all the years no one's come this way."

After a while he added: "Whoever you are, they'll be glad to see you."

In the shimmering sunlight the plain was a transparent lake dissolving in mists that veiled a gray horizon. Farther in the distance, a range of mountains. And farther still, faint remoteness.

"And what does your father look like, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I never knew him," I told the man. "I only know his name is Pedro Páramo."

"Umh! that so?"

"Yes. At least that was the name I was told."

Yet again I heard the burro driver's "Umh!"

I had run into him at the crossroads called Los Encuentros. I had been waiting there, and finally this man had appeared.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Down that way, señor."

"Do you know a place called Comala?"

"That's the very way I'm going."

So I followed him. I walked along behind, trying to keep up with him, until he seemed to remember I was following and slowed down a little. After that, we walked side by side, so close our shoulders were nearly touching.

"Pedro Páramo's my father, too," he said.

A flock of crows swept across the empty sky, shrilling "caw, caw, caw."

Up- and downhill we went, but always descending. We had left the hot wind behind and were sinking into pure, airless heat. The stillness seemed to be waiting for something.

"It's hot here," I said.

"You might say. But this is nothing," my companion replied.

"Try to take it easy. You'll feel it even more when we get to Comala. That town sits on the coals of the earth, at the very mouth of hell. They say that when people from there die and go to hell, they come back for a blanket."

"Do you know Pedro Páramo?" I asked.

I felt I could ask because I had seen a glimmer of goodwill in his eyes.

"Who is he?" I pressed him.

"Living bile," was his reply.

And he lowered his stick against the burros for no reason at all, because they had been far ahead of us, guided by the descending trail.

The picture of my mother I was carrying in my pocket felt hot against my heart, as if she herself were sweating. It was an old photograph, worn around the edges, but it was the only one I had ever seen of her. I had found it in the kitchen safe, inside a clay pot filled with herbs: dried lemon balm, castilla blossoms, sprigs of rue. I had kept it with me ever since. It was all I had. My mother always hated having her picture taken. She said photographs were a tool of witchcraft. And that may have been so, because hers was riddled with pinpricks, and at the location of the heart there was a hole you could stick your middle finger through.

I had brought the photograph with me, thinking it might help my father recognize who I was.

"Take a look," the burro driver said, stopping. "You see that rounded hill that looks like a hog bladder? Well, the Media Luna lies right behind there. Now turn that way. You see the brow of that hill? Look hard. And now back this way. You see that ridge? The one so far you can't hardly see it? Well, all that's the Media Luna.

From end to end. Like they say, as far as the eye can see. He owns ever' bit of that land. We're Pedro Páramo's sons, all right, but, for all that, our mothers brought us into the world on straw mats. And the real joke of it is that he's the one carried us to be baptized. That's how it was with you, wasn't it?"

"I don't remember."

"The hell you say!"

"What did you say?"

"I said, we're getting there, señor."

"Yes. I see it now. . . . What could it have been?"

"That was a *correccaminos*, señor. A roadrunner. That's what they call those birds around here."

"No. I meant I wonder what could have happened to the town? It looks so deserted, abandoned really. In fact, it looks like no one lives here at all."

"It doesn't just look like no one lives here. No one *does* live here."

"And Pedro Páramo?"

"Pedro Páramo died years ago."

It was the hour of the day when in every little village children come out to play in the streets, filling the afternoon with their cries. The time when dark walls still reflect pale yellow sunlight.

At least that was what I had seen in Sayula, just yesterday at this hour. I'd seen the still air shattered by the flight of doves flapping their wings as if pulling themselves free of the day. They swooped and plummeted above the tile rooftops, while the children's screams whirled and seemed to turn blue in the dusk sky.

Now here I was in this hushed town. I could hear my footsteps on the cobbled paving stones. Hollow footsteps, echoing against walls stained red by the setting sun.

This was the hour I found myself walking down the main street.

Nothing but abandoned houses, their empty doorways overgrown with weeds. What had the stranger told me they were called? "*La gobernadora*, señor. Creosote bush. A plague that takes over a person's house the minute he leaves. You'll see."

As I passed a street corner, I saw a woman wrapped in her rebozo; she disappeared as if she had never existed. I started forward again, peering into the doorless houses. Again the woman in the rebozo crossed in front of me.

"Evening," she said.

I looked after her. I shouted: "Where will I find doña Eduviges?"

She pointed: "There. The house beside the bridge."

I took note that her voice had human overtones, that her mouth was filled with teeth and a tongue that worked as she spoke, and that her eyes were the eyes of people who inhabit the earth.

By now it was dark.

She turned to call good night. And though there were no children playing, no doves, no blue-shadowed roof tiles, I felt that the town was alive. And that if I heard only silence, it was because I was not yet accustomed to silence — maybe because my head was still filled with sounds and voices.

Yes, voices. And here, where the air was so rare, I heard them even stronger. They lay heavy inside me. I remembered what my mother had said: "*You will hear me better there. I will be closer to you. You will hear the voice of my memories stronger than the voice of my death — that is, if death ever had a voice.*" Mother. . . . So alive.

How I wished she were here, so I could say, "You were mistaken about the house. You told me the wrong place. You sent me 'south of nowhere,' to an abandoned village. Looking for someone who's no longer alive."

I found the house by the bridge by following the sound of the river. I lifted my hand to knock, but there was nothing there. My hand met only empty space, as if the wind had blown open the door. A woman stood there. She said, "Come in." And I went in.

So I stayed in Comala. The man with the burros had gone on his way. Before leaving, he'd said:

"I still have a way to go, yonder where you see that band of hills. My house is there. If you want to come, you will be welcome. For now, if you want to stay here, then stay. You got nothing to lose by taking a look around, you may find someone who's still among the living."

I stayed. That was why I had come.

"Where can I find lodging?" I called, almost shouting now.

"Look up doña Eduviges, if she's still alive. Tell her I sent you."

"And what's your name?"

"Abundio," he called back. But he was too far for me to hear his last name.

I am Eduviges Dyada. Come in."

It was as if she had been waiting for me. Everything was ready, she said, motioning for me to follow her through a long series of dark, seemingly empty, rooms. But no. As soon as my eyes grew used to the darkness and the thin thread of light following us, I saw shadows looming on either side, and sensed that we were walking down a narrow passageway opened between bulky shapes.

"What do you have here?" I asked.

"Odds and ends," she said. "My house is chock full of other people's things. As people went away, they chose my house to

store their belongings, but not one of them has ever come back to claim them. The room I kept for you is here at the back. I keep it cleaned out in case anyone comes. So you're her son?"

"Whose son?" I asked.

"Dolorias's boy."

"Yes. But how did you know?"

"She told me you would be coming. Today, in fact. That you would be coming today."

"Who told you? My mother?"

"Yes. Your mother."

I did not know what to think. But Edviges left me no time for thinking.

"This is your room," she said.

The room had no doors, except for the one we had entered. She lighted the candle, and I could see the room was completely empty.

"There's no place to sleep," I said.

"Don't worry about that. You must be tired from your journey, and weariness makes a good mattress. I'll fix you up a bed first thing in the morning. You can't expect me to have things ready on the spur of the moment. A person needs some warning, and I didn't get word from your mother until just now."

"My mother?" I said. "My mother is dead."

"So that was why her voice sounded so weak, like it had to travel a long distance to get here. Now I understand. And when did she die?"

"A week ago."

"Poor woman. She must've thought I'd forsaken her. We made each other a promise we'd die together. That we would go hand in hand, to lend each other courage on our last journey -- in case we

had need for something, or ran into trouble. We were the best of friends. Didn't she ever talk about me?"

"No, never."

"That's strange. Of course, we were just girls then. She was barely married. But we loved each other very much. Your mother was so pretty, so, well, sweet, that it made a person happy to love her. You *wanted* to love her. So, she got a head start on me, eh? Well, you can be sure I'll catch up with her. No one knows better than I do how far heaven is, but I also know all the shortcuts. The secret is to die, God willing, when you want to, and not when He proposes. Or else to force Him to take you before your time. Forgive me for going on like this, talking to you as if we were old friends, but I do it because you're like my own son. Yes, I said it a thousand times: 'Dolores's boy should have been my son.' I'll tell you why sometime. All I want to say now is that I'll catch up with your mother along one of the roads to eternity."

I wondered if she were crazy. But by now I wasn't thinking at all. I felt I was in a faraway world and let myself be pulled along by the current. My body, which felt weaker and weaker, surrendered completely; it had slipped its ties and anyone who wanted could have wrung me out like a rag.

"I'm tired," I said.

"Come eat something before you sleep. A bite. Anything there is."

"I will. I'll come later."

Water dripping from the roof tiles was forming a hole in the sand of the patio. Plink! plink! and then another plink! as drops struck a bobbing, dancing laurel leaf caught in a crack between the adobe bricks. The storm had passed. Now an intermittent breeze shook

the branches of the pomegranate tree, loosing showers of heavy rain, spattering the ground with gleaming drops that dulled as they sank into the earth. The hens, still huddled on their roosts, suddenly flapped their wings and strutted out to the patio, heads bobbing, pecking worms unearthed by the rain. As the clouds retreated the sun flashed on the rocks, spread an iridescent sheen, sucked water from the soil, shone on sparkling leaves stirred by the breeze.

"What's taking you so long in the privy, son?"

"Nothing, mamá."

"If you stay in there much longer, a snake will come and bite you."

"Yes, mamá."

I was thinking of you, Susana. Of the green hills. Of when we used to fly kites in the windy season. We could hear the sounds of life from the town below; we were high above on the hill, playing out string to the wind. "Help me, Susana." And soft hands would tighten on mine. "Let out more string."

The wind made us laugh; our eyes followed the string running through our fingers after the wind until with a faint pop! it broke, as if it had been snapped by the wings of a bird. And high overhead, the paper bird would tumble and somersault, trailing its rag tail, until it disappeared into the green earth.

Your lips were moist, as if kissed by the dew.

"I told you, son, come out of the privy now."

"Yes, mamá. I'm coming."

I was thinking of you. Of the times you were there looking at me with your aquamarine eyes.

He looked up and saw his mother in the doorway.

"What's taking you so long? What are you doing in there?"

"I'm thinking."

"Can't you do it somewhere else? It's not good for you to stay in the privy so long. Besides, you should be doing something. Why don't you go help your grandmother shell corn?"

"I'm going, mamá. I'm going."

Grandmother, I've come to help you shell corn."

"We're through with that, but we still have to grind the chocolate. Where have you been? We were looking for you all during the storm."

"I was in the back patio."

"And what were you doing? Praying?"

"No, Grandmother. I was just watching it rain."

His grandmother looked at him with those yellow-gray eyes that seemed to see right through a person.

"Run clean the mill, then."

Hundreds of meters above the clouds, far, far above everything, you are hiding, Susana. Hiding in God's immensity, behind His Divine Providence where I cannot touch you or see you, and where my words cannot reach you.

"Grandmother, the mill's no good. The grinder's broken."

"That Micaela must have run corn through it. I can't break her of that habit, but it's too late now."

"Why don't we buy a new one? This one's so old it isn't any good anyway."

"That's the Lord's truth. But with all the money we spent to bury your grandfather, and the tithes we've paid to the church, we don't have anything left. Oh, well, we'll do without something else and buy a new one. Why don't you run see doña Inés Villalpando and ask her to carry us on her books until October. We'll pay her at harvest time."

"All right, Grandmother."

"And while you're at it, to kill two birds with one stone, ask her to lend us a sifter and some clippers. The way those weeds are growing, we'll soon have them coming out our ears. If I had my big house with all my stock pens, I wouldn't be complaining. But your grandfather took care of that when he moved here. Well, it must be God's will. Things seldom work out the way you want. Tell doña Inés that after harvest time we'll pay her everything we owe her."

"Yes, Grandmother."

Hummingbirds. It was the season. He heard the whirring of their wings in blossom-heavy jasmine.

He stopped by the shelf where the picture of the Sacred Heart stood, and found twenty-four centavos. He left the four single coins and took the veinte.

As he was leaving, his mother stopped him:

"Where are you going?"

"Down to doña Inés Villalpando's, to buy a new mill. Ours broke."

"Ask her to give you a meter of black taffeta, like this," and she handed him a piece. "And to put it on our account."

"All right, mamá."

"And on the way back, buy me some aspirin. You'll find some money in the flowerpot in the hall."

He found a peso. He left the veinte and took the larger coin.

"Now I have enough money for anything that comes along," he thought.

"Pedro!" people called to him. "Hey, Pedro!"

But he did not hear. He was far, far away.

During the night it began to rain again. For a long time, he lay listening to the gurgling of the water, then he must have slept,

because when he awoke, he heard only a quiet drizzle. The windowpanes were misted over and raindrops were threading down like tears. . . . I watched the trickles glinting in the lightning flashes, and every breath I breathed, I sighed. And every thought I thought was of you, Susana.

The rain turned to wind. He heard " . . . the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the flesh. Amen." That was deeper in the house, where women were telling the last of their beads. They got up from their prayers, they penned up the chickens, they bolted the door, they turned out the light.

Now there was only the light of night, and rain hissing like the murmur of crickets.

"Why didn't you come say your Rosary? We were making a novena for your grandfather."

His mother was standing in the doorway, candle in hand. Her long, crooked shadow stretched toward the ceiling. The roof beams repeated it, in fragments.

"I feel sad," he said.

Then she turned away. She snuffed out the candle. As she closed the door, her sobs began; he could hear them for a long time, mixed with the sound of the rain.

The church clock tolled the hours, hour after hour, hour after hour, as if time had been telescoped.

Oh, yes. I was nearly your mother. She never told you anything about it?"

"No. She only told me good things. I heard about you from the man with the train of burros. The man who led me here, the one named Abundio."

"He's a good man, Abundio. So, he still remembers me? I used to give him a little something for every traveler he sent to my

house. It was a good deal for both of us. Now, sad to say, times have changed, and since the town has fallen on bad times, no one brings us any news. So he told you to come see me?"

"Yes, he said to look for you."

"I'm grateful to him for that. He was a good man, one you could trust. It was him that brought the mail, and he kept right on even after he went deaf. I remember the black day it happened. Everyone felt bad about it, because we all liked him. He brought letters to us and took ours away. He always told us how things were going on the other side of the world, and doubtless he told them how we were making out. He was a big talker. Well, not afterward. He stopped talking then. He said there wasn't much point in saying things he couldn't hear, things that evaporated in the air, things he couldn't get the taste of. It all happened when one of those big rockets we use to scare away water snakes went off too close to his head. From that day on, he never spoke, though he wasn't struck dumb. But one thing I tell you, it didn't make him any less a good person."

"The man I'm talking about heard fine."

"Then it can't have been him. Besides, Abundio died. I'm sure he's dead. So you see? It couldn't have been him."

"I guess you're right."

"Well, getting back to your mother. As I was telling you . . ."

As I listened to her drone on, I studied the woman before me. I thought she must have gone through some bad times. Her face was transparent, as if the blood had drained from it, and her hands were all shriveled, nothing but wrinkled claws. Her eyes were sunk out of sight. She was wearing an old-fashioned white dress with rows of ruffles, and around her neck, strung on a cord, she wore a medal of the *María Santísima del Refugio* with the words "Refuge of Sinners."

" . . . This man I'm telling you about broke horses over at the Media Luna ranch, he said his name was Inocencio Osorio. Everyone knew him, though, by his nickname 'Cocklebur'; he could stick to a horse like a burr to a blanket. My compadre Pedro used to say that the man was born to break colts. The fact is, though, that he had another calling: conjuring. He conjured up dreams. That was who he really was. And he put it over on your mother, like he did so many others. Including me. Once when I was feeling bad, he showed up and said, 'I've come to give you a treatment so's you'll feel better.' And what that meant was he would start out kneading and rubbing you: first your fingertips, then he'd stroke your hands, then your arms. First thing you knew he'd be working on your legs, rubbing hard, and soon you'd be feeling warm all over. And all the time he was rubbing and stroking he'd be telling you your fortune. He would fall into a trance and roll his eyes and conjure and curse, with spittle flying everywhere — you'd of thought he was a gypsy. Sometimes he would end up stark naked; he said we wanted it that way. And sometimes what he said came true. He shot at so many targets that once in a while he was bound to hit one."

"So what happened was that when your mother went to see this Osorio, he told her that she shouldn't lie with a man that night because the moon was wrong."

"Dolores came and told me everything, in a quandary about what to do. She said there was no two ways about it, she couldn't go to bed with Pedro Páramo that night. Her wedding night. And there I was, trying to convince her she shouldn't put any stock in that Osorio, who was nothing but a swindler and a liar."

"I can't, she told me. 'You go for me. He'll never catch on.'"

"Of course I was a lot younger than she was. And not quite as dark-skinned. But you can't tell that in the dark."

"I'll never work, Dolores. You have to go."

"Do me this one favor, and I'll pay you back a hundred times over."

"In those days your mother had the shyest eyes. If there was something pretty about your mother, it was those eyes. They could really win you over."

"You go in my place; she kept saying."

"So I went."

"I took courage from the darkness, and from something else your mother didn't know, and that was that she wasn't the only one who liked Pedro Páramo."

"I crawled in bed with him. I was happy to; I wanted to. I cuddled right up against him, but all the celebrating had worn him out and he spent the whole night snoring. All he did was wedge his legs between mine."

"Before dawn, I got up and went to Dolores. I said to her: 'You go now. It's a new day!'"

"What did he do to you?' she asked me."

"I'm still not sure,' I told her."

"You were born the next year, but I wasn't your mother, though you came within a hair of being mine."

"Maybe your mother was ashamed to tell you about it."
Green pastures. Watching the horizon rise and fall as the wind swirled through the wheat, an afternoon rippling with curling lines of rain. The color of the earth, the smell of alfalfa and bread. A town that smelled like spilled honey. . . .

"She always hated Pedro Páramo. 'Doloritas! Did you tell them to get my breakfast? Your mother was up every morning before dawn. She would start the fire from the coals, and with the smell of the tinder the cats would wake up. Back and forth through the house, followed by her guard of cats. 'Doña Doloritas!'"

"I wonder how many times your mother heard that call? 'Doña Doloritas, this is cold. It won't do.' How many times? And even though she was used to the worst of times, those shy eyes of hers grew hard."

Not to know any taste but the savor of orange blossoms in the warmth of summer.

"Then she began her sighing."

"Why are you sighing so, Doloritas?"

"I had gone with them that afternoon. We were in the middle of a field, watching the bevvies of young thrushes. One solitary buzzard rocked lazily in the sky."

"Why are you sighing, Doloritas?"

"I wish I were a buzzard so I could fly to where my sister lives."

"That's the last straw, doña Doloritas! You'll see your sister, all right. Right now. We're going back to the house and you're going to pack your suitcases. That was the last straw!"

"And your mother went. 'I'll see you soon, don Pedro.'"

"Good-bye, Doloritas!"

"And she never came back to the Media Luna. Some months later, I asked Pedro Páramo about her."

"She loved her sister more than she did me. I guess she's happy there. Besides, I was getting fed up with her. I have no intention of asking about her, if that's what's worrying you."

"But how will they get along?"

"Let God look after them."

. . . Make him pay, Son, for all those years he put us out of his mind.
"And that's how it was until she advised me that you were coming to see me. We never heard from her again."

"A lot has happened since then," I told Eduviges. "We lived in Colima. We were taken in by my Aunt Gertrudis, who threw it in

"I'm not sleepy. I slept all day long. Where's your brother?"

"He went off somewhere. You heard him say where he had to go. He may not come back tonight."

"So he went anyway? In spite of what you wanted?"

"Yes. And he may never come back. That's how they all do. I have to go down there; I have to go on out that way. Until they've gone so far that it's easier not to come back. He's been trying and trying to leave, and I think this is the time. Maybe, though he didn't say so, he left me here for you to take care of. He saw his chance. The business of the stray was just an excuse. You'll see. He's not coming back."

I wanted to say, "I feel dizzy. I'm going out to get a little air." Instead, I said:

"Don't worry. He'll be back."

When I got out of bed, she said:

"I left something for you on the coals in the kitchen. It's not very much, but it will at least keep you from starving."

I found a piece of dried beef, and a few warm tortillas.

"That's all I could get," I heard her saying from the other room. "I traded my sister two clean sheets I've had since my mother died. I kept them under the bed. She must have come to get them. I didn't want to tell you in front of Donis, but she was the woman you saw . . . the one who gave you such a scare."

A black sky, filled with stars. And beside the moon the largest star of all.

Don't you hear me? I asked in a low voice.

And her voice replied: "Where are you?"

"I'm here, in your village. With your people. Don't you see me?"

"No, son. I don't see you."

Her voice seemed all-encompassing. It faded into distant space. "I don't see you."

I went back to the room where the woman was sleeping and told her:

"I'll stay over here in my own corner. After all, the bed's as hard as the floor. If anything happens, let me know."

"Donis won't be back," she said. "I saw it in his eyes. He was waiting for someone to come so he could get away. Now you'll be the one to look after me. Won't you? Don't you want to take care of me? Come sleep here by my side."

"I'm fine where I am."

"You'd be better off up here in the bed. The ticks will eat you alive down there."

I got up and crawled in bed with her.

The heat woke me just before midnight. And the sweat. The woman's body was made of earth, layered in crusts of earth, it was crumbling, melting into a pool of mud. I felt myself swimming in the sweat streaming from her body, and I couldn't get enough air to breathe. I got out of bed. She was sleeping. From her mouth bubbled a sound very like a death rattle.

I went outside for air, but I could not escape the heat that followed wherever I went.

There was no air; only the dead, still night fired by the dog days of August.

Not a breath. I had to suck in the same air I exhaled, cupping it in my hands before it escaped. I felt it, in and out, less each time . . . until it was so thin it slipped through my fingers forever. I mean, forever.

I have a memory of having seen something like foamy clouds swirling above my head, and then being washed by the foam and sinking into the thick clouds. That was the last thing I saw.

Are you trying to make me believe you drowned, Juan Preciado? I found you in the town plaza, far from Donís house, and he was there, too, telling me you were playing dead. Between us we dragged you into the shadow of the arches, already stiff as a board and all drawn up like a person who'd died of fright. If there hadn't been any air to breathe that night you're talking about, we wouldn't have had the strength to carry you, even less bury you. And, as you see, bury you we did."

"You're right, Doroteo. You say your name's Doroteo?"

"It doesn't matter. It's really Dorotea. But it doesn't matter."

"It's true, Dorotea. The murmuring killed me."

There you'll find the place I love most in the world. The place where I grew thin from dreaming. My village, rising from the plain. Shaded with trees and leaves like a piggy bank filled with memories. You'll see why a person would want to live there forever. Dawn, morning, mid-day, night: always the same, except for the changes in the air. The air changes the color of things there. And life whirs by as quiet as a murmur . . . the pure murmuring of life . . .

"Yes, Dorotea. The murmuring killed me. I was trying to hold back my fear. But it kept building until I couldn't contain it any longer. And when I was face to face with the murmuring, the dam burst.

"I went to the plaza. You're right about that. I was drawn there by the sound of people; I thought there really were people. I wasn't in my right mind by then. I remember I got there by feeling my way along the walls as if I were walking with my hands. And the walls seemed to distill the voices, they seemed to be filtering

through the cracks and crumbling mortar. I heard them. Human voices: not clear, but secretive voices that seemed to be whispering something to me as I passed, like a buzzing in my ears. I moved away from the walls and continued down the middle of the street. But I still heard them; they seemed to be keeping pace with me — ahead of me, or just behind me. Like I told you, I wasn't hot anymore. Just the opposite, I was cold. From the time I left the house of that woman who let me use her bed, the one — I told you — I'd seen dissolving in the liquid of her sweat. From that time on I'd felt cold. And the farther I walked, the colder I got, until my skin was all goose bumps. I wanted to turn back; I thought that if I went back I might find the warmth I'd left behind, but I realized after I walked a bit farther that the cold was coming from me, from my own blood. Then I realized I was afraid. I heard all the noise in the plaza, and I thought I'd find people there to help me get over my fear. That's how you came to find me in the plaza. So Donís came back after all? The woman was sure she'd never see him again."

"It was morning by the time we found you. I don't know where he came from. I didn't ask him."

"Well, anyway, I reached the plaza. I leaned against a pillar of the arcade. I saw that no one was there, even though I could still hear the murmuring of voices, like a crowd on market day. A steady sound with no words to it, like the sound of the wind through the branches of a tree at night when you can't see the tree or the branches but you hear the whispering. Like that. I couldn't take another step. I began to sense that whispering drawing nearer, circling around me, a constant buzzing like a swarm of bees, until finally I could hear the almost soundless words 'Pray for us.' I could hear that's what they were saying to me. At that moment, my soul turned to ice. That's why you found me dead."

"You'd have done better to stay home. Why did you come here?"

"I told you that at the very beginning. I came to find Pedro Páramo, who they say was my father. Hope brought me here."

"Hope? You pay dear for that. My illusions made me live longer than I should have. And that was the price I paid to find my son, who in a manner of speaking was just one more illusion. Because I never had a son. Now that I'm dead I've had time to think and understand. God never gave me so much as a nest to shelter my baby in. Only an endless lifetime of dragging myself from pillar to post, sad eyes casting sidelong glances, always looking past people, suspicious that this one or that one had hidden my baby from me. And it was all the fault of one bad dream. I had two: one of them I call the 'good dream,' and the other the 'bad dream.' The first was the one that made me dream I had a son to begin with. And as long as I lived, I always believed it was true. I could feel him in my arms, my sweet baby, with his little mouth and eyes and hands. For a long, long time I could feel his eyelids, and the beating of his heart, on my fingertips. Why wouldn't I think it was true? I carried him with me everywhere I went, wrapped in my rebozo, and then one day I lost him. In heaven they told me they'd made a mistake. That they'd given me a mother's heart but the womb of a whore. That was the other dream I had. I went up to heaven and peeked in to see whether I could recognize my son's face among the angels. Nothing. The faces were all the same, all made from the same mold. Then I asked. One of those saints came over to me and, without a word, sank his hand into my stomach, like he would have poked into a ball of wax. When he pulled out his hand he showed me something that looked like a nutshell. 'This proves what I'm demonstrating to you.'

"You know how strange they talk up there, but you can under-

stand what they're saying. I wanted to tell them that it was just my stomach, all dried up from hunger and nothing to eat, but another one of those saints took me by the shoulders and pushed me to the door. 'Go rest a while more on earth, my daughter, and try to be good so that your time in purgatory will be shortened.'

"That was my 'bad dream,' and the one where I learned I never had a son. I learned it very late, after my body had already shriveled up and my backbone jutted up higher than the top of my head and I couldn't walk anymore. And to top it off, everyone was leaving the village; all the people set out for somewhere else and took their charity with them. I sat down to wait for death. After we found you, my bones determined to find their rest. 'No one will notice me,' I thought. 'I won't be a bother to anyone.' You see, I didn't even steal space from the earth. They buried me in the grave with you, and I fit right in the hollow of your arms. Here in this little space where I am now. The only thing is that probably I should have my arms around you. You hear? It's raining up there. Don't you hear the drumming of the rain?"

"I hear something like someone walking above us."

"You don't have to be afraid. No one can scare you now. Try to think nice thoughts, because we're going to be a long time here in the ground."

At dawn a heavy rain was falling over the earth. It thudded dully as it struck the soft loose dust of the furrows. A mockingbird swooped low across the field and wailed, imitating a child's plaint; a little farther it sang something that sounded like a sob of weariness and in the distance where the horizon had begun to clear, it hiccupped and then laughed, only to wail once more.

Fulgur Sedano breathed in the scent of fresh earth and looked out to see how the rain was penetrating the furrows. His little eyes